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Atari Online News, Etc.
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->From the Editor’s Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
  """""""""""""""""""""""""""""

Knowing that there’s been a dearth of new messages in the Atari Newsgroups lately, I’m sure that Joe has plenty to say this week about something in today’s news headlines. So, I’m going to try and finish up this week’s issue on time - for a change - and try to relax. Yup, another long week and I’m tired. And when you’re tired. you either ramble on forever or are unable to formulate complete thoughts! Sooooo, let’s get to it!

Until next time...

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Taskbar 4.12 Released

Taskbar 4.12 has been released today. A few bugs fixed and some features added. The most important change is that Taskbar is now multi-lingual. Currently only English, German and Norwegian is supported, but I’m looking for volunteers to translate it to other languages.

Taskbar can be found at http://atari.nvg.org/download.html

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** Jo Even Skarstein   http://atari.nvg.org/
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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends an neighbors. Another week has come and gone, and traffic in the NewsGroup is all but absent. There just aren't enough posts to put together a good column. So... I guess I've got no choice but to blather on some more about whatever pops into my head.

Pop! Healthcare. Let me say this once again... we DO NOT need healthcare reform. We have the best health care in the world. What we need is health care INSURANCE reform. There is no reason that a family of four should spend more on healthcare insurance PER WEEK than they spend for food in a MONTH. That's just obscene. There's no way around that. It would be different if we were talking about a family with even one person who needed medical care. But we're not. We're talking about a healthy family that goes to the dentist twice a year each, has one medical exam per family member per year for the kids, every other year for Mom and Dad. Everyone's happy and healthy and strong... And yet, insurance costs them PER PERSON more than food costs the entire family. And, without any doubt whatsoever, if they do need to use their insurance, they will find things that are not covered, things that they must spend a predetermined amount of their own money on before their insurance will 'kick in', and other things that their insurance will only pay so much for, regardless of the necessity or the cost.

Huh. I remember when having insurance meant that you didn't have to worry about the healthcare you needed bankrupting you. I guess THOSE days are gone.

But since we've turned out attention from "working for money" toward "making money" things have gone to hell. Let me explain my version of the difference:

When WORKING for money, you actually create something. You build, manufacture, create or plant something that has some value.

When "MAKING money", you can either work for it as above, or simply 'speculate'. You can make money seemingly from thin air by 'betting' on the idea that things are going to increase in value without any added 'work' or that people are going to be willing to pay more for it in the future. The problem is not normal inflation. The problem isn't even that there are people down the line who have already been paid a set price for work they have done. Waiting for something to increase in value is indeed how some fortunes are made. Some of us are just lucky enough to have it work out that way.

No, the problem with this is that now "bean counters" get involved. I hate bean counters. And that's what speculators are, really. The price of oil is as high as it is now not because of the tried and true pillars of supply and demand, but because people are speculating on what the future price might be. Supply and demand is still in effect, but now it's the supply of, and demand for, the best price on selling something in the future.. maybe. It's not even about the product anymore. It's about people betting on what they might be able to sell it for down the road.

And it's not just the oil industry, which is why I mention it now. Bean counters are doing basically the same thing with healthcare insurance.

All insurance is basically a game of chance. When you take out... let's say a life insurance policy... you are, in effect, betting that you are going to die within a predetermined amount of time. The insurance company is, in effect, betting that you won't. If you make it to the end of the

term and you’re still alive, the insurance company wins and gets to keep all the money you’ve paid them over the years and gives you nothing. If you ’win’ and die during that term, the insurance company loses and has to pay your family or your partners or whoever the ’value’ of the policy. That’s the ’game’. That’s the way insurance works.

But when we get to health insurance, things change a bit. They get to "stack the deck" in this little game of chance and decide what they will and won’t cover, how long they’ll cover it, and what they’ll pay for the service. At this point, it really stops being insurance. It’s now.. institutional corporate welfare. They’re basically CHARGING you for providing the means to support their shareholders because, after all, the shareholders are the really important ones, right?

These insurance companies are in a constant struggle to make their balance sheets look good so they can... not cover more people more efficiently and more fully... but so they can get more stockholders to pay more for each unit of stock. That’s a good game to win if you’re a CEO of a big insurance company, but it’s not so good if you’re one of us poor schulbs who has to worry about whether or not our mother-in-law’s hip replacement surgery and rehabilitation is going to be covered.

Now we get to the speculation part. Bean counters (have I mentioned that I HATE bean counters?) will sit down and look at ways to squeeze every last dollar out of... not us... but their shareholders. Gotta get that shareholder money, because that’s where the real profit is! We and our health issues have become just inconvenient markers in a huge game of chance. So the bean counters (I hate those guys!) figure out where they can make cuts to services and benefits, which makes their bottom line look better to prospective shareholders, which make the price per share go up. We barely even enter into the equation!

So... here’s what I think we should do:

First? Strip members of the U.S. Congress (both houses) of their all-inclusive, 100% paid-for-by-their-employers (us) healthcare insurance. Make each one of them have to go out and get their own. And they should have to pick from among the choices that we "regular folks" have, not from something else especially designed for them.

Oh, and they should also have to make arrangements and payments for everyone on their staff too, just like a small business owner has to.

Second? Cap bonuses for every executive in every healthcare insurance provider’s office. Bonuses should be awarded SOLEY on the basis of how efficiently their customers (us) have received the care they’ve needed and how quickly the bills were paid. End of story. We’re not going to let you reward yourselves for sticking it to us anymore.

Third? Stop spending money telling us about things you don’t want to spend money on. If insurance companies would just PAY for some these things, they wouldn’t have to spend the money telling us that they’re not going to pay for them and paying some high-powered image consultant to explain to us why we should be jumping for joy over it.

Fourth? Any executive who tries telling us that malpractice suits make cuts necessary should be forced to spend a night in a crate with a rabid pit bull with AIDS. If I had my way, any executive who had the nerve to blame high costs on malpractice suits would be summarily injected with botulism toxin, steeped in sewage and given a colonic with toxic waste...

none of which, by the way, would be covered by THEIR healthcare coverage.

It IS true that actual health care costs (the cost of procedures and such, NOT the cost of insurance) are rising. The days of one portable X-Ray machine for a hospital are over. Multi-million dollar MRI imagers, CT Scanners, PET Scanners, PET-CT Scanners and the like DO make hospital overhead very high. That's why I think that charitable donations by individuals or companies for the purchase and/or upkeep of these machines should not only be tax-exempt, but should provide a small (per dollar) bonus against their remaining tax debt. Heck, make it TWICE as attractive for T. Boone Pickins to get a bunch of his buddies together and get GE to give them a deal on a new MRI scanner for some small local hospital. Never mind an MRI scanner, make a donation for rubber gloves and syringes and johnny coats. The bottom line is that we've got to make it more attractive for people who CAN donate TO donate. Even insurance companies would get into the act if it would cut their tax debt. And if an institution doesn't have to "make money" to pay for the machine or its upkeep, they can pass that on to their customers... ummm... I mean 'patients'.

The thing we've got to remember, and the place we've got to get back to, is that health care is about helping people and getting/keeping them well, not about wringing every last dime out of someone else's misery.

Well folks, that's about it for this time around. Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - 'Brutal Legend' Suit Settled!
"""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""" 'The Sims' Creator: Beyond...

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!
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Lawsuit Over 'Brutal Legend' Video Game Settled

Attorneys for gaming giant Activision notified a court Wednesday that they reached a settlement over the release of "Brutal Legend," a video game starring Jack Black.

Activision had sued San Francisco-based developer Double Fine

Productions to try to stop the October release of "Brutal Legend" by rival Electronic Arts. Activision claimed it still owned the rights to the game and that Double Fine failed to deliver it on time.

Double Fine countersued, claiming Activision terminated its agreement to release the heavy-metal inspired game after a failed attempt to make it part of the company's lucrative "Guitar Hero" franchise. Double Fine claimed Activision then moved to stop the release of "Brutal Legend" to try to protect "Guitar Hero."

"Brutal Legend" features Black as band roadie transported to a mythical ancient world to fight evil.

Los Angeles Superior Court spokeswoman Vania Stuelp said attorneys for Activision notified the court of the settlement agreement with Double Fine. Attorneys for the companies did not immediately return calls seeking comment on Thursday.

A hearing on a proposed injunction scheduled for Thursday morning was canceled. Activision's attorneys were set to argue why the game shouldn't be released.

Superior Court Judge Craig Karlan told attorneys last week that he was inclined to deny Activision's request and allow the game to be released on time.

Electronic Arts has spent millions promoting the game, which has been featured on gaming Web sites and prominently displayed at the Electronic Entertainment Expo, known as E3.

"The Sims" Creator Eyes The World Beyond Games

Will Wright, the creator behind top-selling videogame "The Sims," is eyeing life outside the virtual world.

Since leaving Electronic Arts in April to run entertainment think tank "Stupid Fun Club," Wright said he views himself as an "entertainment designer" rather than game maker and wants to create worlds crossing every spectrum of media.

Following on from his bestsellers like "The Sims 3" and "Spore," Wright is working on new franchises that can go beyond games to the Web, mobile devices, and traditional Hollywood outlets like television and film.

Wright, 49, said he was fascinating by watching gamers using the editing tools provided with "Spore" to make over 100 million user-generated alien species, space ships and even design games.

"We're taking the idea that you can have a million people engaged not just in entertainment, but also have them creating huge amounts of content for other people to experience," said Wright.

"The question is how can you transfer that to other fields besides games," he added, while refusing to divulge the details of the project he is working on.

In an industry that has more failures than successes, Wright has

distinguished himself in the game world by attracting mainstream audiences to his creations.

"The Sims" franchise has sold over 100 million copies worldwide and it's relationship-focused, non-violent gameplay has attracted an unprecedented female gaming audience - half of "Sims" players are female.

EA has already sold over 817,000 copies of "The Sims 3" in the United States since June, according to The NPD Group.

"Spore" has sold over 1.7 million copies in the United States alone since last year, according to The NPD Group.

""The Sims" was always an experiment," said Wright. "We never thought it'd be a mainstream thing. We simply did a game and started adding expansion packs and did a sequel and added more expansion packs."

Wright said good examples of "cross-media" companies were George Lucas' empire, which runs the gamut from special effects house Industrial Light & Magic to LucasArts and LucasFilm, and the Walt Disney Company.

Speaking at SIGGRAPH this week, the annual gathering of computer graphics professionals, Wright pointed to J.J. Abrams' "Lost" television show, which has used the Internet, as well as games, to build a story expanding beyond the serialized content.

Wright, in his first public appearance since parting ways with Electronic Arts in April, said the fusion of technology will enable future entertainment to be more than interactive.

"Games and stories are generative with one leading to the other," said Wright, who added that games allow people to build models in a virtual world to apply back to the real world.

"People can learn lessons about the past, present and future in an entertaining way."

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

DoD Reviewing Military's Use of Social-Networking Sites

The U.S. Department of Defense is studying the threats and benefits of soldiers and government officials using social-network Web sites such as Facebook and MySpace and mini-blogging sites such as Twitter. The DoD said it is working on a policy for the sites.

Deputy Secretary of Defense William Lynn III set a memo to all branch secretaries directing the DoD's CIO to present the secretary of defense with an analysis no later than Aug. 31. Policies for the Web sites must

be completed no later than Sept. 30.

"These tools are proving valuable in such areas as recruitment, public affairs, and quality of life for our military personnel as well as sharing information with allies, coalition partners, and military families," Lynn wrote. "However, as with any Internet-based capabilities, there are implementation challenges and operational risks that must be understood and mitigated."

Currently, commanders in all branches of the military are responsible for deciding whether soldiers can access and post information to the Web sites, according to Lt. Col. Eric Butterbaugh, a DoD spokesperson.

"Commanders at all levels can make restrictions based on their concern of bandwidth and security," Butterbaugh said. "The effort is now to pull together all the issues, and it is clearly something that is valuable to communications with family - but risks come with it, too, such as security and hacking."

While individual commanders have the discretion to block or allow the use of such sites in any particular situation, the U.S. Marine Corps has banned Marines from using government computers to access such Web sites.

Butterbaugh wouldn’t say whether a uniform policy would trump the decision by the USMC, but he did say a uniform policy could include training in the use of such Web sites.

"I don’t know what the specifics will say," he said. "There are different possibilities."

If the uniform policy is to ban the military from using such sites, hundreds if not thousands of military personnel will be negatively affected, from top-ranking officers such as Ray Odierno, commanding general of the Multi-National Force in Iraq, to soldiers in the field who use the sites to communicate.

John Wilkinson, a former Marine who uses Facebook to keep in touch with soldiers serving in Afghanistan, said Facebook is a useful tool.

"If we would have had {Facebook and MySpace}, it would have been a lot easier to keep in touch with friends and family," Wilkinson said. "I do understand that there are limits to what can be said, but I think we are all smarter than that."

White House Still Seeking Cybersecurity Czar

President Barack Obama is still searching for the right person to lead the fight against an epidemic of cybercrime, the White House said on Tuesday as it came under fire following the resignation of a top cybersecurity adviser.

Melissa Hathaway, who led a 60-day White House review of cyber policies, resigned and said she had withdrawn her application for the position of cybersecurity coordinator out of frustration over the administration’s delays in filling the post.

"I wasn’t willing to continue to wait any longer because I’m not

empowered right now to continue to drive the change," Hathaway, who also worked on cybersecurity issues for the Bush administration, told The Washington Post.

Obama promised in May that he would personally decide who would become cybersecurity coordinator to lead the fight against an epidemic of cybercrime, which threatens the computer networks that underpin the U.S. economy.

Industry officials have pushed for someone to be appointed to the job. Republican Senator Susan Collins, who has worked closely with the Democratic president on many issues, blasted Hathaway’s departure as a sign of the Obama administration’s lack of leadership in cybersecurity.

"The loss of her expertise on this issue is unfortunate," Collins, the ranking Republican on the Senate homeland security committee, said in a statement.

She said the White House should not appoint a cybersecurity czar but should work with Congress to appoint a "cyber leader" at the Department of Homeland Security.

A source with direct knowledge of the search told Reuters in June that those who had been considered included Microsoft Corp’s security chief and an executive from Sun Microsystems. The source indicated Hathaway also was in the running but less likely to be chosen for the job.

White House spokesman Nicholas Shapiro praised Hathaway on Tuesday for "the significant progress she and her team have made on our national cybersecurity strategy."

He said cybersecurity remained a major priority for Obama and insisted the president was committed to finding the right person.

"A rigorous selection process is well under way," Shapiro said.

Separately on Tuesday, Obama’s homeland security secretary, Janet Napolitano, said she was working to recruit industry experts on cybersecurity.

"I hope to recruit some of your smartest people to join the government, so watch out," Napolitano said to laughter from the audience at the Global Cyber Security Conference hosted by the U.S. Secret Service.

"This is a very, very rapidly evolving environment in which real crime and real damage can occur," she said.

Napolitano also acknowledged that because the DHS was a new department, it was not organized well initially to deal with cybersecurity issues when she came on board at the start of the year but that the agency was beginning to mature to address the evolving threats.

Web Site Tracks World Online Censorship Reports

When Shanghai blogger Isaac Mao tried to watch a YouTube clip of Chinese police beating Tibetans, all he got was an error message.

Mao thought the error - just after the one-year anniversary of a crackdown on Tibetan protesters in China - was too suspicious to be coincidental, so he reported it on a new Harvard-based Web site that tracks online censorship.

Meanwhile, more than 100 other people in China did the same thing. The spike in reports on Herdict.org in March pointed to government interference rather than a run-of-the-mill technical glitch, even before Google Inc. confirmed China was blocking its YouTube video-sharing site.

"We saw reports coming in as soon as the blocks were happening and certainly before any of the media were reporting it," Herdict founder Jonathan Zittrain said of the months-long YouTube blackout that coincided with the 20th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square demonstrations in June and recent ethnic riots in the Xinjiang province.

Herdict users report their Web site problems anonymously - numeric Internet addresses are recorded but only general location is displayed - so people can post more freely, encouraging reports about sensitive topics like HIV and AIDS-related sites, and from people in countries with possible government repercussions.

The site doesn't investigate reports, though, so there's no way to know for sure that an outage is related to government meddling rather than a cut cable or other problem unrelated to censorship. Although surges in reports do suggest a government role, a widespread technical glitch can also produce a similar spike.

Web site inaccessibility can also result from network or server errors, firewalls at schools or offices or a new phenomenon called reverse filtering, in which companies block access to copyright-protected material outside a specific country.

Zittrain, law professor and co-founder of Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet and Society, said Herdict does not aim to present a flawless picture of online filtering, but to let patterns of accessibility speak for themselves.

"The goal ... is to gather the kind of raw data from which people can then start to gain insight and come to conclusions," he said. "With enough people asking, you start to get a sense of where there are blockages in the network."

Herdict - short for "verdict of the herd" - has spread beyond techie circles to garner users in more than 140 countries, including censorship hotbeds China and Iran.

"Herdict has been buzzed (about) for months in China and now it's becoming more popular since ... Google.com was blocked for hours and Twitter.com was blocked twice recently," Mao said in an e-mail.

In Iran, Herdict users have logged unsuccessful attempts to access Twitter and other social-networking sites that have been blocked since the country's controversial June 12 presidential election.

Herdict users like that the site fosters a sense of community among those who can't fully navigate the Web and provides them with hope for a freer Internet.

"It gives people a sense how many people share the same blackout

regionally or globally," Mao said. "You are not alone."

Before, someone might complain about a block via a single Facebook or Twitter update, but that information often doesn’t go beyond a small group of friends.

Zittrain started Herdict in February - a month before China’s block began - to aggregate reports of online inaccessibility and help users detect government censorship on the Web as soon as it happens. Having tracked online censorship since the early 2000s, he wanted to put Web accessibility at the fingertips of those who use it most, rather than a handful of experts.

"The less ’online’ class of people generally don’t worry about it, until they run into something blocked like the BBC," said Andrew Lewman, executive director of the Boston-based circumvention tool, The Tor Project Inc. "Then they say, ’Hey, what is this? All I want to do is read this one article.’"

The site has versions in Arabic and Chinese, and an interactive map with a roaming orange sheep to mark inaccessible Web sites.

Don’t expect censorship to go away, though. At most, Herdict can help give people a better sense of the prevalence of censorship.

"I don’t think that a specific monitoring tool will specifically have censorship go away, but we’ll just know about it better," said Robert Guerra, project director for the Internet Freedom Program at the Washington-based Freedom House. "It’s far more pervasive than people think."

Rehab Death of China Internet Addict Concerns

The death of a teenage Internet addict allegedly beaten to death at a rehab camp in south China has triggered calls from medical experts for regulation on treatments for the problem.

Deng Senshan died early Sunday after he was allegedly beaten by trainers at a rehabilitation camp in Guangxi region where his parents had sent him to cure his addiction, state media reports said.

The case triggered outrage on the Internet and medical experts Wednesday called for specific laws and regulations on the diagnosis and treatment of Internet addiction, the official Xinhua news agency reported.

"The market of Internet addiction treatment in China is in a total mess due to lack of diagnostic standards and treatment guidelines," Tao Ran, director of China’s first Internet addiction clinic at Beijing’s Military General Hospital, was quoted as saying.

"The government should end this as soon as possible," Tao said.

Tao regards Internet addiction as a disease which needs medical treatment rather than the "ineffective" military-style training used by some rehab centres.

"The tragedy is not accidental. Most rehab camps adopt military

training, but many teenage Internet addicts cannot handle it well. Thus it comes with conflicts and violence," Tao said.

Tao suggested the health and education ministries and other departments should make joint efforts in the prevention and treatment of Internet addiction, Xinhua said.

"Internet addiction has become the biggest youth problem in China. It deserves wide public concern," Tao said.

China has the world's largest number of Internet users with 338 million - more than the entire population of the United States.

More than 10 million of the country's 100 million teenage web surfers are Internet addicts, the China Daily said Tuesday, citing a survey by the China Youth Internet Association last year.

Apple Releases Mac OS X 10.5.8

Apple on Wednesday released the latest update to Mac OS X Leopard, version 10.5.8, which improves the reliability of key features such as AirPort wireless networking and Bluetooth while also fixing disappearing display resolutions in System Preferences.

Included in the 10.5.8 update is the latest version of Apple's Safari Web browser, version 4.0.2, which was first released last month, as well as an improvement for full-history searches in the browser.

In addition to the AirPort improvements, Mac OS X 10.5.8 features a number of other network-related fixes, such as improved iCal reliability with MobileMe Sync and CalDav, improved data reliability issues with iDisk and MobileMe, overall improvements to AFP reliability, and improved Sync Service reliability.

On the device front, the update brings additional RAW image support for third-party cameras, improved compatibility with some external USB hard drives, a fix for an issue that could prevent importing large photo and movie files from digital cameras, and the aforementioned Bluetooth improvements for external devices, USB Web cameras, and printers.

The 10.5.8 update also addresses an issue that could cause extended startup times and fixes a problem with dragging Aperture images into Automator, which had been incorrectly triggering an iPhoto action.

There are a number of security fixes in OS X 10.5.8 as well, including patches to bzip compression, a fix for buffer overflow issue in ColorSync, improved error handling for launchd, and a fix for MobileMe not signing out properly. Another issue - also resolved in this batch of security fixes - could have allowed someone with physical access to a computer to circumvent a screen saver password through the use of the MacBook's four-finger gesture controls.

Apple also released Mac OS X Server 10.5.8 Update, which improves the reliability of AFP for file services and Time Machine backups, maintains a history of user's previous passwords, propagates file system permissions, and improves Spotlight indexing and memory consumption.

Mac OS X 10.5.8 is recommended for all Leopard users. The update is available via Apple's support downloads page in both incremental and combo update packages, as well as via Mac OS X's Software Update.

Another Day, Another Apple Tablet Rumor

The fog appears to be lifting on the fabled Apple tablet computer, with fresh "details" gaining splashy new headlines. Piper Jaffray, financial analyst Gene Munster, appears to be willing to bet the farm that the Apple tablet is real and will cost $600, be available early 2010, and will mint Apple $1.2 billion in revenue next year.

Munster is sticking his neck out a little further from earlier predictions he's made regarding the Apple tablet. In a case of "is this dØjà vu all over again," in May Munster made nearly identical predictions for the rumored Apple tablet launch, price, and impact on Apple's bottom line. Today's predictions appear to be a refinement to those May predictions.

So what new insight does Munster offer? Not much. But if you listen carefully while reading Munster's predictions you can almost hear the distant cries of "The Apple tablet is coming! The Apple tablet is coming!"

Here are his top predictions for the devices, according to a blog posting on the Wall Street Morning Call:

*Refining his price estimates, Munster is now looking at a price of about $600, right about in the middle of the expectations he described in May, when he believed the price would be between $500 to $700. "Assuming Apple sells about [two million] tablets at a $600 [suggested price] in [2010] it would add about $1.2 billion or about 3% to revenue" next year for Apple, he wrote in his report, according to the blog.

*So when will they launch? Munster is still sticking with his estimate of early 2010. "As talk over a new tablet device from Apple [grows], we are reiterating our thesis that in early [2010] Apple will introduce a touch-screen device similar to an iPod Touch but larger," Munster wrote in his report. "Last week we spoke with an Asian component supplier that has received orders from Apple for a touch-screen device to be fulfilled by late [2009]. This data point underscores our thesis that a tablet will likely launch in early [2010]."

*Who will want these and even buy one? "In most respects, we believe Apple will target the netbook market with its new device," Munster wrote. "In our estimate most netbook buyers are drawn to the portability for prices lower than a full laptop, and use netbooks primarily [for] Web surfing, e-mail, and media. We believe an Apple tablet would be priced 30%-50% below the $999 MacBook, and would offer best in class Web, e-mail, and media software. In other words, we believe Apple's tablet would compete well in the netbook category even though it would not be a netbook."

*What will an Apple tablet be like? "We expect the tablet hardware to be similar to an iPod touch but larger; we expect the key differentiator of the device to be its software," Munster wrote. "While there are several options ranging from a touch screen Mac OS X to an iPhone-like OS, we expect the tablet to be driven by a new version of Apple's iPhone OS that

runs a new category of larger apps alongside all the current apps from the App Store."

Now we wait. Is there an Apple tablet heading to stores near you just in time for the holidays?

Microsoft Cancels 'Windows 7 E' for EU Market

Microsoft is ditching plans to ship a version of Windows 7 without Internet Explorer in Europe amidst concerns from manufacturers that the process would confuse customers, and skepticism from the European Commission.

"In the wake of last week's developments, as well as continuing feedback on Windows 7 E that we have received from computer manufacturers and other business partners, I'm pleased to report that we will ship the same version of Windows 7 in Europe in October that we will ship in the rest of the world," Dave Heiner, vice president and deputy general counsel at Microsoft, wrote in a blog post.

In January, the European Commission announced that Microsoft violated European competition law by bundling its Internet Explorer browser with Windows. As a result, Microsoft announced on June 11 that it would ship a version of Windows 7 in Europe without a browser, dubbed Windows 7 E.

Computer manufacturers, however, expressed concern that consumers would not understand the difference between Windows 7 and Windows 7 E.

"Computer manufacturers and our partners - warned that introducing Windows 7 E, only to later replace it with a version of Windows 7 that includes IE, could confuse consumers about what version of Windows to buy with their PCs," Heiner wrote.

The European Commission was also not thrilled with the plan. "The Commission has suggested that consumers should be offered a choice of browser, not that Windows should be supplied without a browser at all," they said in a statement.

So, it's back to plan A. "We're now confident that shipping Windows 7 with IE in Europe - as we will in the rest of the world - is the right thing to do for our partners and for our customers," Heiner wrote.

Microsoft is not completely off the hook, however. They still have to think about that pesky EU competition law violation. To remedy the situation, Microsoft will present PC users in Europe with a "Web browser ballot" that gives them the option to select Firefox, Safari, Chrome, or Opera instead of IE.

"Shortly after new Windows PCs are set up by the user, Microsoft will update them over the Internet with a consumer ballot software program," Heiner said. "The ballot screen would make it obvious to Windows users that they have a variety of choices when it comes to Web browsing software."

The idea still has to be approved by the Commission, but if it is accepted, Microsoft will also roll out the browser ballot to existing Windows users on XP and Vista machines.

Heiner acknowledged Microsoft is not exactly pleased at having to promote competitors.

"As you might imagine, it was not easy for Microsoft to accept the idea that we would essentially promote directly competing software from within our flagship product, Windows," he said. "Still, we believe that this approach is better for all concerned, including computer manufacturers and browser vendors - and most of all consumers - than an approach focused on removing Internet Explorer from Windows."

The ballot screen might very well prompt Windows users to switch to another browser, but it's unlikely that the move will result in more IE users because competing browsers will not be offering the same ballot, Heiner said.

Microsoft said they are committed to releasing Windows 7 in Europe on the same day it debuts in the United States - October 22 - and "will implement our proposals fully as soon as possible if and when they are officially approved."

Microsoft Releases Windows XP Mode RC for Win7

Announced Wednesday on the official Windows 7 Team Blog, Microsoft has just made available the release candidate for Windows XP Mode.

Windows XP Mode, for those that don't know, is a free downloadable "virtual XP environment" for Windows 7. It's provided mainly as a way for businesses to migrate to Windows 7 without worrying about that one application they rely on that just won't run on Vista or Win7. We gave five reasons why it's not good for consumers back in April, and went hands-on with the feature back in May. Microsoft has made several improvements to the software since then, including:

* You can now attach USB devices to Windows XP Mode applications directly from the Windows 7 task-bar. This means your USB devices, such as printers and flash drives, are available to applications running in Windows XP Mode, without the need to go into full screen mode.
* You can now access Windows XP Mode applications with a "jump-list". Right click on the Windows XP Mode applications from the Windows 7 task bar to select and open most recently used files.
* You now have the flexibility of customizing where Windows XP Mode differencing disk files are stored.
* You can now disable drive sharing between Windows XP Mode and Windows 7 if you do not need that feature.
* The initial setup now includes a new user tutorial about how to use Windows XP Mode

Of course, Microsoft still recommends that customers run everything that they possibly can natively in Windows 7, and leave XP mode for the "last mile" applications that simply can't be made to function properly in the new OS. Given the overhead of XP Mode (it's basically a virtual PC under the hood) and the system requirements (you need a CPU with hardware virtualization, for starters), I think that's probably good advice.

Hackers Attack Twitter, Facebook Also Slows Down

Hackers on Thursday shut down the fast-growing messaging service Twitter for hours, while Facebook experienced intermittent access problems.

Twitter said it suffered a denial-of-service attack, in which hackers command scores of computers toward a single site at the same time, preventing legitimate traffic from getting through.

The attacks may have been related to the ongoing political conflict between Russia and Georgia. They started with hackers using a botnet to send a flurry of spam e-mail messages that contained links to pages on Twitter, Facebook and other sites written by a single pro-Abkhazia activist, according to Bill Woodcock, research director of the San Francisco-based Packet Clearing House, a nonprofit that tracks Internet traffic.

Russia recognized as independent the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia after a brief war with Georgia a year ago.

When people clicked on the links, they were taken to the activist’s legitimate Web pages, but the process of loading the pages at such volumes overwhelmed some servers and disrupted service, Woodcock said. He said it’s hard to immediately tell whether it was a case of hackers trying to punish the sites for publishing views they disagree with, or if they were directing traffic to the sites out of sympathy for the activist’s message.

"There’s very little way of distinguishing which side was taking this action, because either side could hypothetically benefit from it," Woodcock said.

The fact that a relatively common attack could disable such a well-known Web site shows just how young and vulnerable Twitter still is, even as it quickly becomes a household name used by celebrities, large corporations, small businesses and even protesters in Iran.

"Clearly they need a stronger infrastructure to be able to fight this kind of attack," said Graham Cluley, senior technology consultant at computer security firm Sophos. Twitter’s tech support teams, he added, "must be frankly out of breath" trying to keep up with the site’s enormous growth.

According to comScore, Twitter had 20.1 million unique visitors in the United States in June, some 34 times the 593,000 a year earlier.

For Twitter users, the outage meant no tweeting about lunch plans, the weather or the fact that Twitter is down.

"I had to Google search Twitter to find out what was going on, when normally my Twitter feed gives me all the breaking news I need," said Alison Koski, a New York public-relations manager. She added she felt "completely lost" without Twitter.

The Twitter outage began at about 9 a.m. EDT and lasted a few hours.

Facebook, whose users encountered intermittent problems Thursday morning, was also the subject of a denial-of-service attack, though it

was not known whether the same hackers were involved. Unlike Twitter, Facebook never became completely inaccessible. Facebook said no user information was at risk.

LiveJournal, a 10-year-old online diary and blogging site that has waned in popularity in recent years, was also the subject of a denial-of-service attack that lasted about an hour Thursday morning, the company said.

By early afternoon both Twitter and Facebook seemed to be functioning, giving cubicle-bound social media addicts a collective sigh of relief. Twitter warned, though, that as it recovers, "users will experience some longer load times and slowness."

Technology business analyst Shelly Palmer told AP Radio that denial-of-service attacks are a reality of the information age.

"People tend to want to take sites that are very public and go after them," said Palmer, managing director of Advanced Media Ventures Group. "In fact you'd be surprised how many sites for major companies are really attacked on a daily basis. This is a crime, it's a real crime and it should be treated that way."

Earlier this week, Gawker Media, which owns the eponymous media commentary blog and other sites, was also attacked. In a blog post, Gawker said Tuesday it was attacked by "dastardly hackers," leading to server problems that caused network-wide outages Sunday and Monday. It was not immediately clear whether those attacks were related to Twitter's.

Thursday's was not the first - and likely not the last - outage for Twitter.

Besides planned maintenance outages, overcapacity can cripple Web sites, especially such fast-growing ones as Twitter and Facebook.

In fact, service outages on Twitter once were so common that management began posting a "Fail Whale" logo on the Web site to signal when the service was down. The logo featured a whale being hoisted above the water by a flock of birds.

Millions of Twitter users aren't familiar with the 3-year-old service's history of frequent outages because they began tweeting in the past six months, around the same time that the San Francisco-based company had was spending more money to increase its computing power and reduce the disruptions. With the added capacity, the Fail Whale rarely surfaces any more.

Even so, the entire site being down means Twitter hasn't put enough measures in place to prevent such an attack, Cluley said. That could include working with Internet service providers to filter potentially malicious requests from legitimate ones, as well as having servers spread out around the world.

Denial-of-service attacks are typically carried out by "botnets" - armies of infected computers formed by spreading a computer virus that orders compromised machines to phone home for further instructions. They are generally used to send out spam or steal passwords, though some can be commanded to overwhelm Web sites.

Successful attacks on popular Web sites were common earlier this decade.

Sites such as eBay, Amazon.com and CNN were overwhelmed by such attacks, sometimes for days, in 2000.

But Thursday’s attack underscores the fact that no one is immune.

"With these attacks, if you get enough infected machines ... you can take down anyone," said Dmitri Alperovitch, vice president of threat research at security vendor McAfee Inc.

Last month, dozens of U.S. and South Korean sites, including those of the White House and South Korea’s presidential Blue House, were targeted in denial-of-service attacks.

For Lev Ekster, who runs a mobile cupcake truck called CupCakeStop in New York, Thursday’s Twitter hiccup meant no tweets to customers and fans on the truck’s location and the day’s flavors.

But it wasn’t the end of the world.

"As soon as I saw the Twitter outage, I went on to our Facebook fan page," said Ekster, who also uses Twitter to get reviews of his cupcakes, find employees and let people know about giveaways.

The lesson, he says, is "not to limit yourself to Twitter and live or die by Twitter."

How A Denial-of-Service Attack Works

Some details about denial-of-service attacks, like the one Thursday against Twitter.

To picture a "denial-of-service" attack, think about what would happen if you and all your friends called the same restaurant over and over and ordered things you didn’t even really want. You’d jam the phone lines and overwhelm the kitchen to the point that it couldn’t take any more new orders.

That’s what happens to Web sites when criminals and hackers hit them with denial-of-service attacks. They’re knocked offline by too many junk requests from computers controlled by the attackers.

The bad guys’ main weapons in such an attack are "botnets," or networks of "zombie" personal computers they’ve infected with a virus. The virus lets the criminals remotely control innocent people’s machines, which are programmed to contact certain Web sites over and over until that overwhelms the servers that host the sites. The servers become too busy to respond to anything, and the Web site slows or stops working altogether.

People try denial-of-service attacks all the time, but assaults are often unsuccessful because Web sites have ways of identifying and intercepting malicious traffic.

Sites that go down generally are less prepared, because they are less accustomed to being hit or aren’t sensitive enough to warrant extra precautions.

Popular Web sites, like e-commerce and banking sites, have a lot of experience dealing with denial-of-service attacks, and they have sophisticated software designed to identify malicious traffic.

If your computer is being used in a denial-of-service attack, you're likely to see a significant slowdown, because your processing power is being siphoned for the assault. But there aren't always obvious signs that your computer has been infected.

So the best thing is to focus on prevention, namely by having up-to-date antivirus software. If you're concerned your machine might be infected, it's wise to run an antivirus scan. Many antivirus companies offer a free scan from their Web sites.

Tool Helps Avoid Seizure-Inducing Content on Web

Wisconsin researchers have released a free software tool that could help Web surfers susceptible to certain seizures.

An estimated one in 4,000 people has photosensitive epilepsy and could suffer a seizure when exposed to bright colors and rapidly flashing images. The condition gained prominence in 1997 when more than 800 Japanese children were hospitalized after viewing a cartoon. Since then, television directors, video-game makers and others have tested their content to make sure it doesn't reach seizure-inducing thresholds.

Web developers, though, didn't have simple ways to run such tests. Researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison set out to change that.

"On the Web you really never know what's going to pop up on the screen until it does, and one second later you could be having a seizure," said Gregg Vanderheiden, the center's director.

Web developers can use the Photosensitive Epilepsy Analysis Tool, or PEAT, to determine how fast an image blinks, for example, and let developers know whether it poses a seizure risk.

Content that doesn't pass the test isn't always risky. Researchers say flashy content that doesn't fill at least 10 percent of a screen isn't a danger.

Robert Fisher, the director of the Stanford Epilepsy Center in Palo Alto, Calif., said he knew of "dozens of clips" on YouTube that can provoke seizures. He advises viewers with epilepsy to avoid any sites where content blinks and flashes and to be ready to avert their eyes if necessary.

Dr. Giuseppe Erba, a neurology professor at the University of Rochester in New York, said Web developers now have a responsibility to use the testing tool to make sure the content they produce is safe.

Vanderheiden said his next priority is to create tools that give epileptics control over what is shown, so they wouldn't have to rely on Web developers to run PEAT.

One option is a software tool that could detect and disable all blinking content, he said. Another might dim the contrast on the screen to mute

the effect of changing colors.

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